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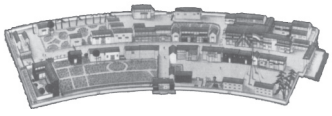

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Afrique

Savants mélanges

Arts et lettres des pays du nord

Mythbusting
Looking for Norwegians in the colonies

Christine Smith-Simonsen

The self-image of Norway is often represented as the *annerledeslandet* (the odd country), as having distinct geographical and societal features. The term was originally introduced during the debates prior to the EU membership referendum in 1994, arguing that Norwegian political values of environmental sustainability, social egalitarianism and global solidarity best be kept intact if it remained outside European Union. Since then, the term has been incorporated into the language and now also refers to the image of Norway as a small state of little consequence, and with a history and tradition void of imperial ambitions or colonial links.

The concept of *annerledeslandet* is easily found in public as well as in political and academic discourses. It projects an idea of innocence that has great political value and that has been an important instrument in the construction of the country's profile, both inside and outside. In terms of domestic discourses, it creates a sense of value; that being different makes it possible to make a difference. It has also diverted public attention from less altruistic activities in foreign countries by Norwegian authorities and enterprises, such as oil extraction in Africa and the realities of Norwegian military operations under the auspices of the US or the UN. In terms of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, the concept of Norway as an egalitarian country with no imperial history and with a long tradition of peace has made it possible for Norwegian

authorities to build competence and a reputation within two niches on the international arena, namely development aid and peace mediation.

Needless to say, the concept of *annerledeslandet* has been met with critique and correction in many different contexts. This article will present one of them; a line of research that puts the myth of Norwegian clean hands/innocence in regards to colonialism under scrutiny.

In the wake of colonialism

Norwegian history can be roughly divided into the following periods: the establishment of an independent kingdom ca 872-1397, the Danish union 1397-1814, the Swedish union 1814-1905, and once again independent kingdom from 1905. To a certain degree one may argue that the Swedish union was on more equal terms than was the Danish. It has been argued that Norway itself was a colony for centuries, and that any imperial activity in this period, such as the slave trade and the establishment of trade stations and colonies, was basically a Danish undertaking.

In 2001, the book *Trankebar* by Yngvar Ustvedt gave a different picture. Having dusted off forgotten source material, Ustvedt laid out the story of how a number of Norwegians, both unknown and prominent, were involved in the establishing and running of the Danish-Norwegian trade posts and colonies in the tropics. Ustvedt was not the first to rediscover these sources. Since the late 1990s, a number of books, articles and theses have been published on the subject of Norwegian activity in the colonies, and some of them will be more thoroughly introduced below.

One project in need of particular attention is "In the wake of colonialism. Norwegian commercial interests in colonial Africa and Oceania". Wake, for short, is an NFR[1] funded project based at University of Bergen/Unifob global. The objective of Wake has been to create knowledge about Norwegian commercial interest in colonial Africa and Oceania in the period ca. 1880-1950. Through the mapping of trade, investments and other similar activities in these regions, the project has sought to rectify the distorted perception of Norway's role in the building of colonial empires, both in terms of academic knowledge

[1] NFR is *Norges forskningsråd*, the Norwegian research council.

and public awareness. In addition to resulting in various publications, the project has also organised an exhibition at the Bergen Museum, *Kolonitid*, with several tableaus displaying various artefacts such as furniture, commodities, posters, newspapers, documents, pictures, books and diaries, clothes and other personal items, thus offering a visual journey into Norwegian colonial activities.

Chosen publications

The publications forming the basis of this article are two biographies, two anthologies and two monographs with a geographic focus. Except for Bjørn Godøy's book on Norwegians in the Congo, they are published within or in connection to the Wake project. All six are academic works in terms of being the result of meticulous research of and with references to a variety of sources, though written to be accessible to a non-academic audience.

Starting with the biographies, these are *Fenomenet Thams* (2006) by Elsa Reiersen, and *Zanzibar-Olsen. Norsk trelasthandel i Øst-Afrika 1895-1925* (2008) by Anne K. Bang. Christian Marius Thams (1869-1948) was, as Reiersens title indicates, a phenomenon, at least within a Norwegian context. Entrepreneur, businessman, architect, diplomat and international networker; Thams was truly a notable man. Reiersens book takes the readers through three generations of the Thams family, focusing mainly on Christian Thams, portraying both his endeavours as well as the times in which they took place. In the context of this article, the most interesting part is Thams' enterprises in Africa, where he invested in plantations, industrial enterprises and other commercial interests in countries like Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. No doubt, the most impressive of all Norwegian colonial undertakings is the "Société du Madal", a conglomerate of *prazos* in Mozambique of together ca. 4000 square meters, 40,000 inhabitants and 70,000 palm trees that Thams ran together with Prince Albert I of Monaco. Norwegian capital is still heavily invested in this plantation.

Anne K. Bang's portrait of Zanzibar-Olsen is of a more low-key life, yet no less interesting. As a representative for NEAT, the Norway East Africa Trading Company, Oscar Christian August Olsen (1857-1925) resided in Zanzibar from 1896 until 1918. NEAT consisted in reality

of only two people: Olsen, conducting the business and its networks from Zanzibar, and his counterpart Wilhelm Klein, providing the consignments from Norway. According to the biography, Olsen led a quiet life, notwithstanding the relatively exotic choice of residence. He went about his business without much ado, yet Bang pictures a man with a keen eye for his surroundings and with a sharp sense of humour.

The more geographically focused publications of choice are *Nordmenn i det koloniale Kenya* (2010) by Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland, and *Solskinn og død. Nordmenn i Kong Leopolds Kongo* (2010) by Bjørn Godøy. Kjerland offers detailed accounts of the Norwegians who travelled, did business or simply lived their lives in colonial Kenya. Accompanying the text is a wide selection of photographs, collected by the goodwill of these Norwegians' many relatives and descendants. Kjerland's accounts offer keen insights into how Norwegians came to be partakers in colonialism in different ways, yet these are represented in a pragmatic way so as to leave any political analysis or moral judgement to the reader.

Bjørn Godøy's presentation of Norwegians and their doings in the Congo Free State is not as balanced. Understandably so, since the general Western perception of Kenya as a relatively peaceful, controlled settler colony embodies a different guilt-complex than the perception of the mad slaughterhouse that was Leopold's Congo. From 1883 until 1908 about 170 Norwegians took part in the colonising of the Congo, mostly sailors and traders, but there were also legal professionals, administrators and officers enlisted in Leopold's service. Godøy's project is evidently that of a moral confrontation, but he manages to bring forth the people behind the actions, even those atrocious, making their lives and decisions conceivable within the context.

Finally, the two anthologies are *Nordmenn i Afrika og afrikanere i Norge* (2002) edited by Anne K. Bang and Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland, and *Kolonitid. Nordmenn på eventyr og big business i Afrika og Stillehavet* (2009) edited by Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland and Knut M. Rio. *Nordmenn i Afrika og afrikanere i Norge* is comprised of 22 contributions of various formats sorted by six different categories, each with a introductory comment by the editors. The themes covered are early contacts between Norwegians and Africans in the 18th century, Norwegian settlers in colonial Africa, various professionals being in Africa in their line of

service, Norwegian whaling on the African coast, Norwegians in service in the Congo Free State, and a final leg on Africans who for various reasons came to live (parts of) their lives in Norway. The making of this book was the precursor to establishing the Wake project.

Kolonitid offers 14 single contributions, not sorted by defining sections. Still, the themes generally cover the following areas of contact and activities; shipping, trade, whaling and settlement within the period 1870-1950. The contributions differ in form and common accessibility, ranging from basic research accounting for the source material at hand, to more analytical approaches to the themes in question. The book is beautifully furnished with maps and photographs, and some of them are truly priceless in their grasping of the very image of colonialism.

Norwegians in the colonies

Prior to 1850, Norway was a peasant society with only about 10 % of the population living in urban centres. During the course of the century, changes in agriculture and health facilities caused significant population growth. Growing industrialisation and urbanisation absorbed this growth to a certain extent, and by the turn of the century, 45 % of the population was urbanised. Still, the pressure on resources was critical, and emigration became all the more common as a tentative way out of misery. During the period 1825-1930 about 800,000 left home to seek greener pastures overseas. This may not seem a large number in respect to the emigration from other European countries, but the population of Norway in 1890 counted only 2,000,000. The larger part of this emigration was westbound, and there has been a lot of research on those who ended up in the United States. A not entirely insignificant portion left for the south and east, however, but only now researchers have started retracing their footsteps.[2]

The greater part of emigrants leaving for America was farmers in search of land. The same may be said for those who ventured to Australia or New Zealand. The majority of those who ended up in the southern hemisphere, however, made up a group less homogeneous. The reasons

[2] Approximately 1/3 of the Nordic emigrants ventured for other areas than the USA. Bang, Anne K. and Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland (eds.) *Nordmenn i Afrika – afrikanere i Norge*, Bergen, Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2002, p. 3.

for leaving were manifold, and even more so the rationale for settling down, if not by mere coincidence. The following sections will present some of the main categories of enterprises and activities that brought or attracted Norwegians to Africa in the days of colonialism.

Shipping – gateway to the world

The majority of the population in Norway is settled by the coast, and the sea has always played a significant role in Norwegian societies, both in regards to fishing and sailing, and - more recently - to oil. The seafaring adventures of the Vikings are well known, but in medieval times, the Hanseatic League had the upper hand in trade and shipping in these regions. Norwegian shipping began its recovery in the 1830s when Sweden / Norway entered into a deal with Great Britain, whereby the Norwegians were to ship Swedish timber to Great Britain. The repeal of the British Navigation Acts in 1849 had even greater implications for Norwegian shipping. Over the next 30 years, Norwegian tonnage multiplied five times, and in 1879 a total of 46,695 Norwegians were registered as sailors on Norwegian ships. In 1890, the number had increased to about 60,000. The secret behind the success of Norwegian shipping and freight was the strategy of low operating costs. This was done through the buying of old sailing vessels and rigging them down in order to sail with as few hands on deck as possible. This reduced speed, of course, but time was not of essence when transporting durable cargo such as timber, coal, grain, etc. The low costs thus far outweighed the slow pace, and was the main competitive power of Norwegian tramp trade. Throughout the 19th century, Norwegian tramp ship fleet consisted of sailing vessels, increasingly with steel hulls, but eventually steamships entered Norwegian shipping as well. The technical capacities of steamers made it possible for ship owners and trading companies to set up liner trade, but sailing vessels continued to be a common feature of Norwegian shipping far into the 20th century.[3]

Tramp trade, and later also liner trade, brought Norwegians all over the world: to the huge, bustling, busy harbours of major cities as well as to more peripheral corners. The ever-growing network of

[3] Kjerland, Kirsten Alsaker; Knut M. Rio (eds), *Kolonitid. Nordmenn på eventyr og big business i Afrika og Stillehavet*, Oslo, Scandinavian Academic Press / Spartacus forlag. 2009, p. 6-7, and Knut M. Nygaard in *Ibid*., p. 11-20.

trade partners and agents raised the need for proper administration of Norwegian interests. Both within shipping and trading, the question of formal representation became all the more acute. In fact, the issue of a separate Norwegian consular service was the final straw which led to the demise of the Swedish / Norwegian union.[4] From then on, Norwegian consulates were established in central ports all over the world, and by 1914 they numbered more than 600. One important motive behind these establishments was to develop and better utilise the opportunities offered by the colonial undertakings and enterprises of the great European powers. However, this perspective, showing Norwegian political and economic awareness of and orientation towards European imperialism, is commonly overlooked or under-communicated in mainstream Norwegian history writing on the consular issue.[5]

One of the consular tasks was to give assistance to sailors left astern. Given the strategy of keeping costs at a minimum, Norwegian vessels were often in poor condition. The percentage of shipwreck was high, particularly around the turn of the century, and during the decade of the 1890s alone almost 4000 Norwegian sailors were lost at sea. Life on board was tough, work was hard, the crew was usually shorthanded and their diet poor. Many died or suffered from typical diseases like scurvy and beri-beri.[6] Throughout the heydays of Norwegian shipping it was not uncommon for sailors to jump ship or sign off, particularly those who had signed on as a means to leave Norway to seek their fortune elsewhere. Many, of course, opted for America, Australia or New Zealand, but a growing number took their chances in Africa or on one of the many mythical islands of the Pacific.[7]

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[4] The union was peacefully dissolved 1905, unilaterally by the Norwegian parliament on June 7, then after months of negotiations, Norway was recognised as an independent monarchy by Sweden on October 26.

[5] Svein Ivar Angell in *Ibid*., p. 111, 122-123. Angell's research shows how this line of motivation came forth on a political level; in debates in parliamentary bodies and selected committees. He states that it is yet to be studied how these interests were expressed in public discourse.

[6] Knut M. Nygaard in *Ibid*, p. 14-15.

[7] Gustav Sætra in *Ibid*, p. 30-31, and Edward Hviding in *Ibid*, p. 128.

Traders, entrepreneurs and settlers

Trade and shipping go together, and the bustling colonial activities with the construction of buildings and railroads, extraction of raw materials, mining and commercial farming offered new opportunities in terms of both freight and sale of Norwegian timber and products. Some of the Norwegian merchants who ventured into these markets never set foot in the colonies, and traded only through brokers or company networks. With the expansion of Norwegian shipping, however, a growing number of Norwegian trade agents took up posts in its wake, and many settled abroad for life.

Through the sale of commodities like timber and prefabricated houses, and through commercial and industrial enterprises like plantations and mining and the manufacture of products like paint and furniture, many Norwegian investors, merchants and entrepreneurs placed and increased their assets through colonial enterprise. Some of these became prominent figures with substantial impact on local societies as developers of infrastructure, employers, managers or landowners.

The most illustrious character operating in the colonies was Christian Thams. Thams came from a prominent bourgeois family, architect by education, and became a major entrepreneur within trade and industry. One of his main activities was the sale of prefabricated houses, both to Europe and Africa. Around 1910, he phased out his Norwegian priorities, and turned his assets and interest to international investments and activities, mainly in the colonies. In 1910 Prince Albert I of Monaco offered him the job of running his plantations, the Société du Madal, in Mozambique. From 1911, Thams was both the director and major stakeholder in this company. From 1913, he took on a similar role at the Société des Plantations de L'Afrique Française in Senegal/Niger, also in cooperation with the Monégasque prince.

In the following years, Thams invested in a number of colonial enterprises. He was the main stakeholder in two other ventures in Mozambique; a caoutchouc company and "Tradeplant", a company dealing with trade, shipping, plantations and stock farming. He also invested in rubber and coffee plantations in Uganda, sisal plantations in Kenya and gold and platinum mining in Ethiopia – among other things. Thams' affiliation with Prince Albert gave him his initial foothold in the colonies, but Thams also attracted a number of other Scandinavian

stakeholders with plenty of capital to this scene, and many of the above-mentioned companies were owned by Thams together with fellow investors from the Norwegian and Swedish *haute-finance*. Although travelling extensively and spending time at his estates, Thams directed his business and networks mainly from Paris, his place of residence until he died in 1948.[8]

Oscar Olsen, also known as Zanzibar-Olsen, is another character brought into the limelight by recent research. Far less extravagant than the life and enterprises of Thams, his story is an important representation of life and trade in the colonies when being but a collateral branch of the imperial powers. As representative for NEAT, the Norway East Africa Trading Company, Olsen resided in Zanzibar from 1896 until 1918. NEAT traded mainly in timber, but occasionally other commodities were tried out as well, such as small boats, oars, windows, doors, tables and chairs, iron, punch, canned milk and matches. Until the development of harbours such as Mombasa, Dar-es Salam and Tanga around World War I, Zanzibar was the busiest harbour in these waters. Thus, in 1906 Norway established an honorary consulate. Christian Janssen, Olsen's assistant for many years, was appointed to the task, Olsen being too busy with the management of NEAT. In practice, however, the burdens of consular services were shared between the two.

Olsen married late in life, and while in Zanzibar his main companions seem to have been his assistants, his sister and the house cat. His recreational preferences were the sailing club and the English club and, more reluctantly, occasional social gatherings among the island's European inhabitants. But then, Olsen was not a high-profile capitalist investing in enterprises and local infrastructure and society, he was an ordinary man running an ordinary business. In 1918 NEAT was sold to ship-owner Thor Thoresen and another major Norwegian investor, Haakon L. Mathiesen. Two years later, the company was sold on to no other than Christian Thams' Société du Madal.[9]

The main concentration of Norwegians in Africa south of the Sahara seems to have been South-Africa, and to some extent East Africa and

[8] Elsa Reiersen in Ibid. and Reiersen, Elsa, *Fenomenet Thams*, Oslo, Aschehoug, 2006.
[9] Anne K. Bang in Bang and Kjerland, op. cit., and Bang, Anne K., *Zanzibar-Olsen. Norsk trelasthandel i Øst-Afrika 1895-1925*, Bergen, Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2008

the Congo, thus settling mainly in British areas. Financially influential figures such as Thams and Mathiesen were involved in commercial estates in several locations and attracted Norwegian employees to manage their affairs. For instance, several Norwegian individuals and families came to live in Kenya in connection with the Azania estates, owned by Norwegian investors. The majority of the Norwegian settlers, however, were ordinary people opting for a new start and striving to live up to the expectations of European colonial standards. The total number of Norwegian settlers in East Africa was microscopic, both in regards to Norwegian emigration and to the European settler population in the area. Yet, about one hundred Norwegian adults took up residence, many with their families, and those who did well also left their mark on local society through development of infrastructure and social institutions.[10]

The major part of Norwegian settlement was in South-Africa, however, and particularly noteworthy being the Thesen family and their estates. After the bankruptcy of the Thesen shipping company in 1868, the entire family left Norway. They destined for New Zealand, but their voyage halted in Cape Town. After a few years the family decided to settle in Knysna, a small town of only 25 households, but strategically important for being the only protected harbour between Cape Town and Port Elisabeth. Having resumed shipping activity, the Thesen family soon gained economic foothold, and under the leadership of the business talent Charles Wilhelm Thesen, the family rose to prominence. Thesen & Co ventured – and mostly succeeded – in a great number of enterprises and investments: trade, shipping, various agencies, insurance, real estate, steam, sawmills, railroads, whaling, mining and transport. Timber and felling was the main enterprise, however, and by 1923 the Thesen family owned 1/6 of all land in the Knysna region. The town of Knysna expanded duly, and by 1911 the population counted 10,000 inhabitants. The Thesen family controlled most of the trade and enterprises in the area, and the family position was clearly marked by C. W. Thesen being in office as mayor for several periods. In addition,

[10] Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland in Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit.*, p. 275-291, and Kjerland, Kirsten Alsaker, *Nordmenn i det koloniale Kenya*, Oslo, Scandinavian Academic Press, 2010.

his brother Nils Peter Thesen was appointed as the first Norwegian general consul in South-Africa, residing in Cape Town.[11]

Whaling

In the 1930s, a Norwegian vessel anchored in a bay in French Congo. To their surprise, they found that the local inhabitants mastered some Norwegian, some of the women were dressed in burlap with the logo of a Norwegian cement factory, and the modest cabins were constructed with case boards that had once contained Norwegian products such as soap, powdered milk and other dry food. The explanation for this was very simple; the bay had been the location of a Norwegian whaling station, and the inhabitants had been working for the Norwegian whalers.[12]

Aside from timber and shipping, whaling was a great undertaking within Norwegian enterprise. The establishment of land-based whaling stations and factories during the period of 1904-1925 represented the single largest Norwegian industry outside of Norway. Norwegian whalers ventured into the southern hemisphere from 1904, and from 1908 they also established activity on the African continent along the coasts of Congo, around the Cape and Portuguese East Africa. By 1912, reports told of "unhealthy competition". At the time there were 25 Norwegian whaling companies operating in these areas, four of them around Durban alone.[13]

The common perception of Norwegian whaling is that it was performed by Norwegians, but in fact a significant portion of the workforce in the southern hemisphere was African. Most of them were recruited from South-Africa, mainly Zulus, but there were also many from Cape Verde. Initially, the Cape Verdeans came on board whaling vessels as stowaways, but having long traditions within whaling themselves, these islanders were gradually hired on a more formal basis to both vessels and land based stations. The majority of Zulus among South-African workers in this business was probably due to the network between Norwegians in the colonies, in this case with the well established Norwegian missionaries in Zululand. At the land based

[11] Erlend Eidsvik in Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit.*
[12] Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[13] Bang / Kjerland, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

stations, the workforce would mainly consist of local people. Most colonies had established forced labour to enable the local population to pay taxes. The whaling companies would thus often hire local work teams through the local colonial authorities.

The workforce of Norwegian whaling in the southern hemisphere was clearly ethnically diverse, particularly during World War I when Norwegian whalers were hard to come by. Needless to say, the African workers were at the bottom of the hierarchy. The reason for hiring Africans was obvious. Norwegian workers would have to travel a great distance, and they required higher pay. The Africans were at the bottom of the pay scale and they abounded. When being able to hire ten Africans for the cost of one European, the math speaks for itself. However, there were exceptions where Africans were given more prestigious tasks that valued their skills within the art of catching and processing whales and other large sea mammals.[14]

In colonial service

The first Norwegian in the Congo was Christian Smith. As a professor in botany and economics at the newly-established University of Oslo, in 1816 he was invited to partake in a British expedition bound for the source of the Congo River. His task was to collect botanic material. They did not get very far. After only 450 km they turned back for the coast, many of them succumbing to the environment. Smith was among those who died, but he had managed to collect 620 botanic species, whereof 250 were thus far unknown to science. Smith had initiated the work on mapping the commercial potential of the Congo.[15]

By the end of that same century, more Norwegians were to venture into the Congo. From having begun as inaccessible to Europeans and a "white man's grave", it was to turn into an uncontrolled ground for colonial brutality. Leopold's Congo is among the darkest chapters of colonial history, and ardently condemned in its aftermath. About 200 Norwegians partook in the colonisation of the Congo, and some of them were active in the atrocities against the local populations. The Norwegians involved were sailors on the Congo River, merchants,

[14] Dag Ingemar Børresen in Kjerland/Rio, *op. cit.*, and Bang/Kjerland, *op. cit.*, p. 159-186.
[15] Godøy, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

trade agents, workers for chartered companies, colonial officers, legal practitioners and military personnel. The Congo was – and is – an area rich in natural resources, and at home, Norwegian authorities were bullish about Norwegians establishing networks in Congo that might suit national economic interests.[16]

Norwegians served in other colonies as well, mainly British, within various parts of colonial administration. One particular line of service worth mentioning, and not technically colonial, is the *Tribunaux Mixtes d'Egypte*, the courts serving the many nationalities residing in Egypt. The judges came from all European countries, but were employed by the Egyptian government and thus represented Egypt. A total of seven Norwegian judges worked in these courts, and the last one, Erling Quale, also served as court president.[17]

Busting the myth of Norwegian innocence?

The reception of the research on Norwegians in the colonies has been characterised by general surprise. Norwegians partook in the colonisation of Africa? Does this bust the myth of Norway as being the *annerledeslandet*? Norwegian shipping and whaling is commonly known, and obviously this line of activity brought many Norwegians to far corners of the world. The extent of their permanent settlement abroad, their many different enterprises and occupations, and the extent of Norwegian investment in the colonies, however, has been somewhat more surprising. Perhaps most surprising of all is how this knowledge has been neglected or under-communicated. Compared to the total number of Europeans residing in the colonies, the Norwegian contribution may easily be ignored. The Norwegians going south are also clearly outnumbered by those who emigrated to the west. Still, they were there, and many of them had significant impact on local societies.

The publications at hand mainly tell the story of the Norwegians in question. This focus is partly explained by the availability of sources, but it is also a matter of perspective. Analysing Norwegian interaction with and attitudes towards the local populations, and the conditions they

[16] Espen Wæhle in Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit.*, and Godøy, Bjørn, *Solskinn og død. Nordmenn i kong Leopolds Kongo*, Bergen, Spartacus forlag, 2010.
[17] Kjartan Andersen and Saphinaz-Amal Naguib in Bang / Kjerland, *op. cit.*

offered African employees should be objectives for further research, preferably in cooperation with African scholars.[18] Some insights are offered, though, in particular regarding the conditions offered to African whalers and their relationship with their Norwegian colleagues and employers. Indications are also given as to how Norwegian estate owners related to Africans living on their land. These larger enterprises often engaged in the development of local institutions such as schools and administrations buildings, and infrastructure such as roads, railroads and telegraph lines, undertakings that left their mark on society. Moreover, some of these enterprises were chartered companies with freedom to exercise their own interests as long as they acted within colonial laws. In effect, they ruled over the people living on their land, having the right to conscript forced labour and to levy taxes.[19]

In general, the impression given is that Norwegians in African colonies lived quite separate from local societies, as was mostly the case with other Europeans. The picture seems a little different if turning to Norwegians settling in the Pacific, where the majority seems to have integrated into society on a much larger scale, assimilated through marriage, friendship and work. Some even managed to recreate themselves as local nobility, such as Valdemar Knudsen, who in the 1850s became *konohiki* in the island Kaua'i, answering only to the king of Hawaii.[20]

In Africa, Norwegian residents were more inclined to assimilate with the British. During the Boer wars, however, Norwegian settlers fought on both sides. Being able to choose sides or to remain neutral could be an asset. The Thesen family in Knysna, for example, was attached to both sides through marriage and other alliances. This deviant position made them able to navigate politically and economically more freely than the established majority groups.[21] This is in line with the concept of *annerledeslandet*; that the marginality of Norway and being Norwegian can be a powerful tool. Another example of this is that Norwegian entrepreneurs and estate owners were often able to remain

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[18] This kind of coperation has been successfully carried out in a few of the contributions in Bang / Kjerland, *op. cit*. and in Kjerland/Rio, *op. cit*.

[19] See among other contributions Dag Ingemar Børresen, Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Elsa Reiersen in Kjerland / Rio, op. cit., and Reiersen, *op. cit*.

[20] Knut M. Rio in Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit*.

[21] Erlend Eidsvik in Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit*., p. 58.

after independence while other Europeans were asked to leave. Vilhelm Koren, for example, who by the 1930s had managed to establish himself as one of the largest exporters of gold from Tanganyika, was one of the last colonial entrepreneurs to close his business in 1970. Likewise, the small-time sheep farmer Hans Ravn sold his farm after Kenyan independence and ended up as an executive in a major company in Nairobi. Only when he retired in 1987 did he leave the country.[22]

In 2009, two Norwegians were arrested in the Congo, accused of having murdered their Congolese driver. Both the ensuing public discourse and the event itself go to show the lines of continuity both of Norwegian self-image and Norwegian presence in Africa. Not that Norwegians have the habit of travelling Africa committing crimes, but the presence of the two Norwegians in the Congo was not so much out of the ordinary as represented in Norwegian media. Norwegians followed in the wake of European colonialism, exploiting the opportunities offered, to generate material wealth, to establish a new life or to pursue religious or humanitarian vocations. This did not change much with independence. Norwegian investors and companies are still very much active in Africa, as are missionaries and aid workers. What is the true difference between "white man's burden" and "white man's bad conscience"? Even though the discourse has changed, the asymmetric power relations still apply.

It is hard to avoid having a moral approach to this history of colonial activity. And it is very easy to reject it entirely, the number of Norwegians involved having been so small, relatively speaking. Clinging to the myth of the *annerledeslandet*, the common reaction is to be either appalled or dismissive. None of these approaches are very useful, however, nor very interesting. Norwegians were – and are – not that different from everybody else, just as good and just as bad, and just as eager to board the gravy train whenever the opportunity presents itself. Or, as the editors of *Kolonitid* dryly remark; Norway should praise the fact that Count Fritz Wedel Jarlsberg's negotiations did not succeed.[23] Being the Norwegian representative at the Versailles Conference in 1919, he argued that Norway should receive one of the German colonies as compensation for

[22] Kjerland, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
[23] Kjerland / Rio, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

lost lives and tonnage during World War I. That would certainly have made it less easy to ignore Norwegian participation in colonial activities.